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Representation and Identity: A Postcolonial Comparative Study of Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the representation and construction of identity in Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* (1993) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) from a postcolonial perspective. It contends that a sense of identity for African diasporic individuals is still historically determined by the experience of slavery as well as current racial hierarchies. There are the psycho-traumas associated with forced migration, loss and cultural dismemberment that Phillips' work explores; but there are also twenty-first century migration, trans-national mobility and racial self-consciousness explored by Adichie. Both narratives are analyzed in this research through Edward Said's Orientalism, Frantz Fanon on racial psychology, Homi Bhabha on hybridity, Paul Gilroy and his Black Atlantic transnationalism and Gayatri Spivack with her perspective on subaltern agency. This comparative reading illustrates how identity is formed over time through colonial memory, cultural adaptation, border crossing, language acquisition, gender expressions and the politics of self-representation.

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Introduction

The African diaspora has always been a site of intellectual, cultural and literary exchange. From the forced migrations of slavery, to postcolonial patterns of voluntary migration by African diasporas, African identity continues to evolve under the pressures of history and contemporary global politics. Writings transcend mere academic discussion as they offer a substantial locus for retrieving censured voices and reconstructing stories written out of Eurocentric analysis. Though 120 years of historical experience separate Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, they share a common narrative thread: the effort to define selfhood in an era of displacement. Phillips' novel travels through three centuries, tracking diasporic histories formed by slavery and its aftermath. Adichie's novel is situated in a globalizing world where immigration and the politics of race consciousness and identity negotiation are emerging as new modes of displacement. Whereas Phillips builds characters whose cultural identities have been annihilated, Adichie constructs characters whose cultural identities are negotiated as a strategy of survival. The article is based on the postcolonial thesis that African identity is not a private matter of an individual, nor its solely inherited trait. Identity still resonates at the core of postcolonial studies. Nations and peoples captured, enslaved, scattered and forcibly displaced are still troubled in their self conceptions. Postcolonial texts indicate that identity is unsteady as it is reconstructed repeatedly through the dominance of culture, negative displacement, racial, and economic power. The debt of literature from formerly colonised societies is amplified as it offers a form to whose existence, history distorted or erased and misrepresented the identity. Two canon-shaping texts addressing these issues are Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* (1993) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). Both novels are part of the African diaspora, but they are originating from worlds in history. Phillips reimagines historical trauma out of the faces looted by the Atlantic slave trade, which he says still haunts people's identity to this day. Adichie, meanwhile, is exploring the situation of today's African immigrants in Western countries to understand how identity continues to be formed by race and globalisation.

Reading these two texts in conjunction with each other also opens up the possibility of a fully postcolonial reading that crosses not only historical periods but also colonial and postcolonial possibilities. Phillips is backward looking to the roots of displacement, while Adichie studies how they live in immigrant consciousness. Each novel proves that identity is relational: molded not just by where you come from but how you're shaped by foreign cultures, racial stereotypes, language and memory. Through the use of postcolonial theory that is made up by ideas such as Edward Said's Orientalism, Frantz Fanon and his thoughts on psychological colonization and

Homi Bhabha who spoke of hybridity and Paul Gilroy who wrote about Black Atlantic, this essay claims that *Crossing the River* and *Americanah* introduce identity as being fluid, fragmented and located in history. Whereas Phillips uncovers identity as a theft of slavery and cultural disintegration, Adichie illustrates her subjects to be negotiated in the conditions of contemporary migration, technology and self-disclosure. Both writers seek to affirm narrative authority, to counter dominant narratives of African identity that are distorted by colonial and Westernist discourse. Their novels ultimately indicate that such an identity; whether in the eighteenth century or the twenty-first century; is always a process of border crossing: cultural, racial, national, linguistic, and psychological.

The identity in African Diaspora is examined by post colonial literature. By "diaspora," we mean people who have been forced to leave their homelands by slavery, colonialism and capitalism (Gilroy). African subjectivities, therefore, do not emerge solely from singular national narratives but from transnational circuits of cultural exchange, resistance, and memory. *Crossing the River*, by Caryl Phillips, and *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, likewise reckon with how we come to be who we are in a world of time, space and power. *Crossing the River* spans three centuries and several places, and reveals how the transatlantic slave trade can deform identities that exist outside of stable senses of belonging. Phillips demonstrates how slavery's violence intervenes in memory and cultural origins through multiple stories that resonate with postcolonial silencing of master narratives. In *Americanah*, by contrast, we're given a postcolonial identity that plays out in the 21st-century world on a mobile basis. The protagonist, Ifemelu, immigrates from Nigeria to the U.S. and is faced with racial categorizations that warp how she sees herself. The racial awakening Ifemelu undergoes and her blog post critiques are quite topical; they again reflect on current instances of racial capitalism, as well belonging politics. Both show identity to be historically formed through power and representation; colonization in Phillips' case and globalization and race in Adichie's.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism is a seminal critique of how in Western discourse the colonized "Other" was conceptualized as to rationalize domination and cultural hegemony. Said contends that colonial power reconfigured not just political systems, but epistemologies; who is allowed to speak and whose knowledge has standing. In *Crossing the River*, this epistemic erasure is embodied by black Africans being coercively exiled into slavery. The characters' scattered recollections and efforts to piece together their own histories are crystalline evidence of cultural suppression. Phillips' mode of narration, which lacks a single authoritative perspective and focuses on the personal narratives can be deemed as an attempt to challenge Said's critique of homogenising representational practices. Said later elaborated this critique in Culture and Imperialism, arguing that literary works support an empire's discourse. In Phillips and Adichie

alike, literary form (by means of multi-vocality and nonlinearity) avoid monolithic representation and instead give privilege to peripherized experiences.

Central to understanding the psychological aspects of colonialism is Frantz Fanon's work. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he explains how the colonized fuse the image of themselves produced by the gaze of the colonizer with their own personal image. In *Crossing the River*, Nash's mission to "civilize" and evangelize serves as a metaphor for the mental confusion that characterizes colonial education and western imitation. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's "American" accent and the racial designation she acquires when she arrives in America 13 delineate a Fanon-style split self that must negotiate between an inherited cultural identity and imposed racial hierarchies. This stress on racialized interiority offers Fanon a lesson about what it means for identity not to be predicated simply on external labels, but as embodied experience that the operation of social power organizes. The novels represent characters grappling with these structures, whether by resisting them, accommodating them or appropriating them; and what they do is to flesh out the lived reality of Fanon's psychological analysis.

Homi Bhabha's hybridity helps to rethink postcolonial identity beyond coloniser/colonised. Identities, for Bhabha, are produced in a "third space" – a site of negotiation, ambivalence and cultural churning. Characters like Nash and Travis in *Crossing the River* incarnate hybridity: Nash, Western-shaped but African-removed, or Travis, trapped between Black American identity and larger historical currents. The very nature of Phillips' narrative – the plethora of voices and temporal disruption – is symptomatic of a hybrid textual form which refuses closure and singular interpretability. Hybridity in *Americanah* appears through transnational mobility. Ifemelu is not a Nigerian entirely, nor is she an American; instead she sits at the border between worlds. Her decision to co-opt elements of both and to resist essentialist racial taxonomies is a typical example of Bhabha's postcolonial subjects who occupy hybrid spaces in which new identities are negotiated and per formed.

Paul Gilroy rethinks diasporic identity not as embedded within bounded nation-states, but as a transnational formation across the Atlantic shaped by histories of slavery, migration and cultural exchange. Gilroy's framework is especially useful for a work such as *Crossing the River*, which tracks lives and memories across space and time. Characters' journeys – from Africa to the Americas, from Liberia to Europe during wartime – map an essential serf of the Black Atlantic: one less tethered to nationalist narratives than grounded in collective experience of dislocation and cultural resilience. Black identity is dissolved in this transnational context rather than being rooted in a single ancestral home, writes Gilroy; a notion that finds common ground with Phillips' articulation of memory as restorative and unreliable, and which travels on global axes.

Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak? did not have a coherent point of view on one issue nor could they have; there was no way to ask for the perspective. From Spivak's perspective,

the relations of language and narrative are often constrictive for subaltern agency. Both novels via their narrative structures and focalization, strive to (speak back to) give voice to the historically voiceless: slaves by in Phillips' case, and contemporary migrants by Adichie's. Through their focus on personal stories and their refusal of authoritative history-makers, these novels embed alternative expressions of knowledges and discourses that trouble conventional representations of the past.

This study also uses an interdisciplinary approach incorporating close reading with postcolonial theory. It consists of five steps:

Textual Analysis: close reading of Crossing the River (1993) and Americanah (2013), concentrating on narrative structure, characterization, and themes of identity, memory, and race.

Theoretical Applicability: Said, Fanon, Bhabha, Gilroy and Spivak to interrogate the representation and negotiation of identity.

Secondary scholarship: Combining recent criticisms of the two novels about memory, identity crisis, hybrid subjectivity and diasporic consciousness.

Context: Placing historical and contemporary works alongside each other to illuminate correspondences and differences in diasporic subjectivity.

"The African Father's Prologue" in Phillips' *Crossing the River* is an African father whose three children are sold into slavery. "I have sacrificed my children", (Phillips 1) as the play begins articulates a spiritual tone, positioning the transatlantic trade in human cargo as familial trauma and exposing the spiritual breach inherent in African Diaspora experience. The prologue deals with history and guilt, the father is "sorrow," "guilt," and "loss", there are no simple solutions to healing. According to postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy the diasporic identity is produced by this rupture: "the loss of a singular origin gives rise to a network of cultural affiliations" (The Black Atlantic). The father represents the partitioned motherland, grieving for both children and history. This prologue, also in response to Gayatri Spivak's famous query, "Can the subaltern speak? The father's voice belongs to a realm outside Western historical records, poetic and unarchived. Phillips makes certain African voices inform the work, aware that Eurocentric accounts' silencing of them make it necessary. The children; Nash, Martha and Travis, stand as figurative avatars for different African diasporic journeys, illustrating Homi Bhabha's assertion that identity is hybrid and fragmented.

"The Pagan Coast" traces Nash, a former slave shaped by Edward Williams, who goes on to become a missionary in Liberia. The chapter compares Christian civilization discourse with post emancipation identity anxieties. Williams takes a condescending tone toward Nash and self-reflexively projects how oppressive language resides within the colonized. And Nash, although "free," is still in bondage: his freedom is bound to the same system that put him there. (Nash, Williams thinks, can "save Africa," echoing a colonialist fantasy about Christianity and Liberia.)

Nash assimilates to Western cultural perspectives, in so far as he is a mimetic being. He even later describes Africans as "lazy," "childlike" and "ignorant," regurgitating colonial stereotypes. This is the psychological alienation that Fanon writes about. With a narrative that upends conventional historiography, intercutting Williams' journals with letters and showing how there are truths against truths. Phillips unmasks the hypocrisy of Williams and thrusts Nash's disillusion into light, as he takes his life to mark the end of an attempt to assimilate themselves with their colonizers. His act of adopting a white-shaped self-identity founders, proving that the colonial otherness obstructs genuine identity construction.

"West" traces the life of Martha Randolph, a slave who was sold and resold; once she was separated from her family. The narrator changes to third-person focalization drawing attention to Martha's sense of alienation in modernity as "the woman who did not belong anywhere" (Phillips 80). This embodies Edward Said's notion that exile results in "unhealable rifts" from one's place of origin. With Martha propelled westward, Phillips traces a legacy of African American identity that is inextricably linked to the violent shaping of U.S. nationhood, rereading the myth of frontiers as a geography of trauma for the enslaved. Martha's memories of the past are non-linear, and they include lost children and lovers. As Gayatri Spivak notes, subaltern histories are often silenced: Martha does not appear in national archives, but Phillips re-imagines her story through fiction, retelling narratives that erase enslaved women. When she was buried by strangers, Martha's death in Colorado, cold and unnamed, represents slavery as being fragmented but her unlawful burial illuminates a transnational Black community. In connection to this Paul Gilroy proposes that diaspora constitutes a collective memory space, of which Martha is one member. Her last words "My child" (Phillips 106) echo the father's prologue, confirming that identity is still relational despite historical obliteration.

The chapter "Somewhere in England" traces the romance between Travis, an African American GI stationed in World War II England, and Joyce, an English woman. Travis embodies a Black "diaspora modernity" formed through military identity and racial look (while locals exoticize him as "the dark one" [Phillips 141]). Joyce undergoes an existential crisis: her attraction to Travis when she is aware of his status as a nationalist suggests that it will bring about a break from nationalism. Some critics argue that Phillips uses Joyce to probe how the interracial self is formed. Tragedy strikes when Travis is killed in combat in Italy, leaving Joyce alone to raise their mixed-race son, Greer, who grows up and eventually leaves Africa. This chapter demonstrates the periodic returns of African American identity to Africa. Phillips mirrors Gilroy's diasporic loop of cultural exchange, and when Joyce listens to Travis's "laughter warm as Africa" (Phillips 174), one hears evolution of black humanity in Fanon free from racial objectification.

In "The Return," an unnamed African American academic goes to Africa in search of his roots, but feels dispossessed: "This is Africa. I am African. But I do not belong" (Phillips 218).

This parallels with Bhabha's notion of hybridity in identity, and a critique of essentialist Afrocentric presentations. Africa is not some utopia; it has bureaucracy and modern-day facts of life. Fanon observed that romantic nationalism can be just as constricting as colonialism. The narrator's failure to "return home" is consistent with Gilroy's claim that diaspora identity cannot be resolved through geographical return. There are no pure origins, just trajectories. In Africa the narrator is "American" reversing racial categorization; there, identity is relational and unstable. Phillips concludes in resignation: "I turned my back on the sea" (Phillips 237) as an image of continued uprooting. The Atlantic – as does identity itself, not just trauma.

Across these seven sections, identity emerges not as essence but negotiation: Nash stands for colonial mimicry, Martha represents subaltern erasure and Travis exhibits hybridity and modernity. The diasporic disillusionment shows in the returned academic. The novel challenges linear identity narratives, articulating identity as a roundabout return in time through memory, trauma and story. And Phillips' fragmented narrative technique which includes shifting narration, disrupted chronology and polyphonic structure, points out that the diasporic identity can't be confined to any one national language.

Adichie starts *Americanah* by situating Ifemelu within a Nigerian middle class enmeshed in postcolonial contradictions. Early chapters explore how Nigerian identity is formed by colonial education, language politics, class hierarchies and Western values. Ifemelu, Obinze and other characters go to elite schools where they are taught British literature and English grammar. Obinze pores over British novels, dreaming of England: "He had fantasies of London, walking the streets in snow-crunching boots." (Adichie 65). These reveries mirror Homi Bhabha's "pull of mimicry," in which colonial subjects romantically idealize Western civilization. Nigerian classrooms idealize "British accents," ridiculing spoken English from home, a vivid example of Fanon's linguistic shame (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Adichie presents the University of Nigeria as a corrupt and wobbly one, governed by western ideologies. Ifemelu emigrates because opportunities are lacking in her home country, calling to mind Edward Said's take on postcolonial states in global economic communities. Ifemelu herself does not initially identify racially as "Black" but more so by Nordic on the basis of education and class. Adichie endorses Paul Gilroy's argument that Blackness is a culturally and spatially constituted category. For Ifemelu, coming to America is a form of identity conversion; as she puts it, "I became black in America." (Adichie 273)

The novel believes that race, like the physical attributes of men and women or intelligence or health, is a social category not innate. Colonised people, according to Fanon, learn such racialization within racist structures. And Ifemelu absorbs the "racial grammar" of America, where she is made African American-but-not-American. A question in a job interview about her experience working in the US suggests that skills she's acquired world wide are somehow deemed irrelevant. Homi Bhabha says identity evolves in hybridity; Ifemelu is still negotiating her

personhood. At first she adopts "an American accent to pass" but eventually takes on her Nigerian voice, resisting linguistic coloniality. Her boyfriend Curt, though well-meaning, does not understand racial workings and calls her "exotic", reminiscent of Orientalism. Adichie critiques immigrant success narratives; Ifemelu's travails expose economic violence in global capitalism. The white couple she babysits for demonstrates patronizing charity, which only serves to reinforce hierarchy. Obinze's existence in Britain parallels Ifemelu's struggles, illustrating the ways that European migration perpetuates colonial economies of labor. Migration does not free Africans; it re-racializes them in new terms of degradation.

Hair has its place in *Americanah*, showing the value of hair to identity. Ifemelu's decision to process her hair ahead of a job interview is internalized more deeply: "The smell of burning, of something organic dying." (Adichie 251). Hair becomes a symbol of assimilation and sacrifice. The black women's salon encourages community memory, as in Trenton where patrons argue about Africa, America and femininity. "Relaxing hair is what makes you professional," the hairdresser says. (Adichie 252), to illustrate how professionalism is constructed through whiteness. And later, when Ifemelu goes natural for a haircut, she sees herself: "She looked in the mirror and saw herself." (Adichie 257), resembling Fanon's idea of recapturing identity. Academics assert that Black hair is political (Banks; Mercer; hooks). The novel demonstrates this: hair symbolises community and political awareness. Views by Nigerians on Natural Hair There is, however, a contrast in Nigerian opinions towards natural hair as Aunty Uju whose opinion is stated as "She looked like a boy" (Adichie 270) shows intra-diaspora conflict. The hair in Americanah represents diasporic negotiation: acceptance, refusal, change.

Ifemelu's blog is a textual rebellion and also a subaltern voice, skirting white publishing gatekeeping. It deals with racist microaggressions like "Dear Non-American Blacks, when you come to America, become black" (Adichie 273). The blog rejects exceptionalist myths, modifying that immigrants need to be aware of Black American history. In her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak writes that neither does the subaltern travel (much) nor can they speak, yet Ifemelu leverages the internet to do just that. It's a self-defining blog, enabling her to write herself rather than be written by others. This is postcolonial narrative innovation, memoir-cum-essay-cum-satire in hybrid form for a hybrid identity.

In *Americanah*, romance shapes identity. The Ifemelu-Obinze love affair is a story of African emotional continuity that outlasts migration, changes in class and marriage. The reuniting of Paul and Ifi in Lagos points to a reconciliation with identity, not geography. Obinze's marriage to Kosi is a performance of Nigerian class without the thrill. Through Bhabha's concept of hybridity, relationships depict that identity is constructed through social space. Love represents cultural orthodoxy, not Western values. Ifemelu's re-entry into Nigeria complicates stories of return when she experiences reverse culture shock and grapples with her hybrid identity. Her new

blog which critiques Nigerian class rather than race, and shows identity as a process rather than a self-contained construct proves this. The novel ends on an unresolved note – a signal that identity is an ongoing process.

Conclusion

Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* depict shifting notions of Black identity over time and space. While both texts explore racial dislocation and the desire for belonging, their distinct historical contexts manifest different forms of diasporic trauma. Phillips emphasizes Mongrel identity as constituted by erased histories, through characters such as Nash and Martha who resist flexible identities imposed via colonial violence. He critiques the 'Black Atlantic' by revealing its human toll under colonialism. In contrast, Adichie's Ifemelu negotiates race and identity in a contemporary world, where problems include racial objectification and cultural misrecognition. As Phillips depicts identities broken by colonialism, Adichie's story hints that Black identity may be retrieved through self-definition. The comparison of the texts demonstrates transformation postcolonial identity. Phillips recovers memory for the silenced, Adichie criticizes contemporary America for the living. Taken together, they expose the genderedness of belonging in the post-colonial era while disrupting Eurocentric narratives via fragmentation and linguistic subversiveness. The article contends that the African diaspora is a long ongoing process and *Crossing the River* represents the abolition of identity through slavery; that is, whilst it represents an end-point, it also leads to another step in reconstructing one's lost and destroyed self-identity as happens in third generation. Phillips wants to bring back lost voices; Adichie hopes to avoid silence in the future. Both propose that identity is fluid, negotiated among a variety of influences and constituted in resistance. The relation between these works bears witness to the fact that the African diaspora can no longer find a home in only one location but is rather nourished by multiple, crossing points of passage. Finally, they offer a range of African identity, underlining the centrality of voice and ownership to postcolonial condition.

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